



Bread and Roses: Artists and the Class Divide

February 19–May 1, 2016
Opening: February 19, 2016 at 7 p.m.

Curators: Łukasz Ronduda, Natalia Sielewicz
Curatorial collaboration: Jan Sowa

Artists: Jacek Adamas, Iván Argote, Art Workers Coalition, Brace Brace, Jesse Darling, Debora Delmar Corp., Deterritorial Support Group, Andrea Fraser, Nicolás Guagnini, Núria Güell, Rafał Jakubowicz, Christian Jankowski, Tobias Kaspar, Zofia Kulik, Gerard Kwiatkowski, Leigh Ledare, Zbigniew Libera, Michał Łagowski, Magdalena Malinowska, Adrián Melis, Metahaven, Marta Minujín, Teresa Murak, Daniela Ortiz, Zygmunt Piotrowski, Józef Robakowski, Daniel Rycharski, Georgia Sagri, Cindy Sherman, Santiago Sierra, Łukasz Surowiec, Christopher Kulendran Thomas, Gavin Turk, Andrew Norman Wilson and Renzo Martens presents: Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs des Plantations Congolaises

Artists have continually questioned their status and place in society. The widespread vision of the artist as an outsider from the peripheries of social life, a utopia seeker, a celebrity selling works for millions, or an erudite nonconformist who voices his or her opinions in the public debate, has spawned many myths concerning their privileges and obligations in the contemporary world.

The exhibition formulates a question about the way artists define their status and position in the realm of an ever-widening economic gap: the possibility to reconcile dreams of social justice with the need of artistic freedom and autonomy. At the same time, the show highlights the tension between an artists' rather ambivalent affiliation with the intellectual or financial elite and their responsibility for the rest of the society. For artists occupy a paradoxical position among social classes. Quoting Pierre Bourdieu, they form "the dominated part of the dominant class"; they can "flirt" both with the dominant elite and with the emancipation-oriented groups who feel oppressed.

This peculiar bipolar position adopted by artists provokes reflection on the way they highlight their affiliation, identification, or aspiration to a given social class, and the way they reveal their own privileged class position. Curators are interested in the process that transforms the existential and institutional figure of the artist into a medium that some use to demonstrate and modify their entanglement in the mechanisms of socio-economic divisions.

The exhibition shows the ways in which the tension that characterizes the current political and social conflicts in Poland becomes central to the art world and the figure of the artist. It is a tension between the symbolic and

financial elites and those who are excluded from the so-called “establishment”—between those adjusted to capitalism and those who feel used and humiliated. The exhibition presents the nuance of this issue by placing it in a broader international context.

The aforementioned approach takes as its historical point of departure the economic and social transition that has occurred during the last fifty years: from the political upsurge of 1968 to the modern-day political turmoil stirred by the protests of the outraged movement, the precariat, and Occupy movements. The exhibition features infographics created specifically for the show by sociologist Jan Sowa in collaboration with graphic designer Michael Oswell, which illustrate this political metamorphosis and its social consequences. It is difficult not to refer here to views held by economists and sociologists, such as Thomas Picketty and Immanuel Wallerstein, who believe that the developed societies of the Global North are currently witnessing a return to the logic of nineteenth century capitalism. The domination of neoliberalism is coupled with a sharpening class divide. It is a major change in comparison to the days of the “emancipatory anomaly in capitalism” between the 1950s and 1970s (caused by the existence of real socialism, which “softened” the way capitalism functioned in the West). The condition of contemporary art — both at the level of aesthetic practice and the way it functions in society — can also be understood as one of the symptoms of this situation. Insofar as in the 1960s and 1970s, avant-garde artists (Art Workers Coalition, Kulik, Kwiatkowski, Piotrowski) still worked in the context of a universal anticapitalist and equal-rights project focused on emancipation (communism followed those principles at least theoretically) — whereas today artists are forced to confront the defeat of such a project, often finding themselves in an emotional and financial stalemate.

The exhibition features artists who formulate a critique of the current neoliberal reality, but at the same time, manifest that this reality rules out any possibility of a truly emancipatory artistic practice. They postulate a transition towards a more egalitarian society, while their project simultaneously articulates the impossibility of such a society in our times, marked as it is by growing class division (Adamas, Argote, Fraser, Güell, Martens, Melis, Sagri, Surowiec). Other artists articulate such an endeavour in the development of a consistent business model (Brace Brace, Debora Delmar Corp., Kulendran Thomas, Martens, Wilson) or enter into dialogue with popular culture as tool of resistance (Turk, Minujin, Methaven).

The exhibition showcases a broad spectrum of approaches and strategies of identification—from the voices of artists who consciously reveal their place among the symbolical and financial elites (Fraser, Guagnini, Jankowski, Kaspar, Ledare, Robakowski, Sherman, Sierra, Turk) to approaches that reveal an affiliation with the precariat and the working classes (Darling, DSG, Jakubowicz and Malinowska, Li Liao, Libera, Łagowski, Murak, Ortiz).

The artists presented in exhibition are very sensitive to the fact that involving marginalized communities in art may sometimes become problematic; the rationale of such an assessment, that the class identity of artists and artistic institutions, which easily turns art’s social engagement into compassionate attention offered to those who are weak, is akin to charity, a domain that, again, belongs to the habitat of the upper crust of the society.

The title of the exhibition refers to a 1911 speech by Rose Schneiderman, activist for women workers' rights in the US, and the genesis of the famous union song “Bread and Roses” in the 1970s: “the worker must have bread, but she must have roses too.” The status of contemporary artistic practice can be ironically summarized with the same slogan: Artists do sometimes fight for bread for the poor, but their work at least as often consists in delivering roses to the representatives of the social elites. However, the goal is not to affirm the former or to negate the latter—the examples of both kinds of practices are well known, as well as critical diagnoses devoted to art’s entanglement in the world of late capitalism. The point is rather to highlight the tension between them, which stems from the dependency of artistic work on transformations in the social, economic, and political field. The avant-garde dream of creative practice that would go beyond the border of art and life appears as a dated myth. Still, we can see that art refuses to limit itself to the role of a luxury decoration in a bourgeois salon. Currently, the dreams of the socially engaged avant-garde of the twentieth century can be neither fulfilled nor abandoned, leaving it suspended between bread and roses.

Venue

Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw
51, Emilii Plater Street
Warsaw, Poland
www.artmuseum.pl

Opening hours

Tuesday–Sunday 12 p.m. – 8 p.m.
Admission free

Digital catalogue

<http://breadandroses.artmuseum.pl/>

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